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Rethinking the Relation between Science and Religion: Some Epistemological and Political Implications

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In contemporary western societies we have become used to thinking of the relation between “science” and “religion” (or between “faith” and “reason”) in disjunctive terms, assuming a necessary opposition and/or the overcoming of one of them by the other (science as an understanding of the world necessarily opposed to religious beliefs and practices, one which tends historically to overcome the latter in the progress of civilization). An example of this pervasive assumption is the widespread narrative that frequently appears in elementary and secondary school history programs regarding the Church’s persecution of Galileo and his final condemnation for heresy due to his pioneering scientific discoveries. Another perspective that was influential in forming this same pervasive assumption was the clear-cut Kantian separation between a theoretical use of reason —capable of yielding an objective, necessary and universal scientific knowledge of empirical phenomena expressed in the laws discovered by science, as distinct from the practical use of reason to guide us in how to live, beyond the limits of all positive

knowledge of the world. This same conception was formulated later in the distinction drawn by Weber between the “facts” that social sciences are called on to describe objectively and the “value judgments” relegated to the subjective spheres of morality and religion. Without attempting to identify the precise historical origins of this widespread interpretation of a necessary opposition between science and religion, how would you, in your work as a historian of science / as a theologian, submit it to a critical assessment and, hence, argue in favor of reconsidering this dominant conception of the relation between science and religion as an unbridgeable dichotomy?

Mauricio Nieto (MN): There certainly is a long and dominant historiographical tradition that has narrated the rise of modern science as a triumph of reason over faith, of experience over superstition, and one which assumes that western Europe is the cradle of a superior form of rational, objective, neutral, scientific knowledge in opposition to the beliefs of others and to religious dogmas in themselves. However, this

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assumption, according to which a new and unique form of secular, rational, objective and neutral knowledge arose more or less spontaneously in some corner of western Europe is very difficult to sustain. The very idea of a “Scientific Revolution” has been severely questioned, and the search for a father, a place, or a historic moment to explain the origin of modern science has become increasingly difficult. There is abundant and very convincing literature in the history and the sociology of science that offers us a much more complex narrative today, and one of the key topics in recent debates on the history of science is precisely the question of its relation to religion.

Let us start with the obvious; the historical period and the protagonists of the traditional idea of a “Scientific Revolution” are all marked by a profound spirituality. The idea that the 16th and 17th centuries witnessed the consolidation of a new rational philosophy as opposed to faith and belief is unsustainable. The Iberian explorers of the New World, and figures like Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, Newton, Boyle, Bacon, Descartes, all the heroes of that supposed scientific revolution, were profoundly religious and in most cases their works are rendered meaningless without their theological conceptions of the universe.

The case of Galileo is a good example of this idealized history of a revolutionary type of thought. His story shows those epic nuances of the free thinker who opposed the irrational obscurantism of the Church, but this is actually a dramatized history that is more in tune with the notions of 19th and 20th century science than with those of Renaissance Europe. The authority of a figure like Galileo, we know, was made possible in part due to his connections to both court and church. Of course there really were tensions and persecutions by the Inquisition with respect to the difficult ideas of Copernicanism, but to look for the fathers of a new philosophy that broke with all of ancient and medieval tradition in the 17th century is a task that is doomed to fail. A quick look at some of the names that are often linked to the birth of modern science make this difficulty evident. René Descartes is, for many, the father of rationalism or of mechanical philosophy and modern thought, but it is obvious that all of his philosophy sought a metaphysical and theological foundation. In the same light, we can see that the thinking of Boyle, Newton or any of the other great heroes of modern philosophy would be incomprehensible without the notion of God.

On the other hand, the idea of a radical epistemological rupture that was unique to the European Renaissance is equally problematic. It is evident that medieval philosophy, which has traditionally been considered a slave to religion, played a definitive role in what we understand as modern science today. To a great extent, the notion of modern science has to do with the consolidation of a new natural philosophy, a new cosmology and a new physics that broke away from Aristotelian paradigms, but what is not always evident is the fact that this distancing from the natural philosophy of Aristotle has its origins in Christian theology and its effort to consolidate a philosophical foundation for Christian dogma. Nor do I believe that it is possible to understand what we call modern science today without recognizing its relation to the Hermetic tradition, to magic, and to forms of Neoplatonism that sought to understand God through observation and the study, not only of his word—Sacred Scripture—but also of his work, Nature itself.

Western science and Christian theology, more than being two opposite, antagonistic, irreconcilable traditions, actually share both a past and very deep common bases. John Hedley Brooke (1991) has gathered together many of the complex interactions between science and religion from a historical perspective. Brooke as well as other historians of science have revised the common narrative of a conflict between a religious mentality and a scientific one, the former founded on faith, the latter grounded in verifiable facts and rigorous, rational methods. Today it is evident that the relations between theology and natural philosophy are complex and may even share fundamental elements. This is not the place to go into details about the complexity of these relations at different moments in the history of western philosophy, but it may be useful to remember that the very possibility of understanding the natural order and confiding in causal relations is based on the assumption of a theological concept of Nature in which the idea of design and, therefore, of a rational creator is a necessary condition for human knowledge of the natural order. Stephen Gaukroger (2006), from a much more philosophical perspective, convincingly shows us the theological roots of modern western philosophy. In most traditional histories of modern science and its great heroes like Johannes Kepler, Robert Boyle and Isaac Newton, little or no importance is given to the fact that all of them, with no exception, shared a common religious mentality, and their scientific and theological concerns cannot be separated. Furthermore, the idea of the more or less spontaneous birth of modern culture is usually explained as an achievement of the 17th century as if the

great philosophers of Christianity such as St. Augustine or St. Thomas do not form part of modern intellectual history, which is very questionable if we take into account the fact that modern philosophy in the western world is undeniably rooted in the scholastic tradition.

Franklin Gamwell (FG): The “unbridgeable dichotomy” to which this question refers is implied if science in relation to religion is equated with reason in relation to faith. On that equation, critical reasoning about the world is exhausted by science, so that religious convictions can only be “matters of faith,” meaning thereby beliefs immune to critical or rational validation or invalidation. I am here assuming that science is disciplined empirical inquiry, that is, a pursuit of knowledge about certain contingent facts, and thus all scientific statements can be denied without self-contradiction. If critical reflection about the world is exhausted by such inquiry, all conditions of existence are contingent, and no statement that asserts any such condition is necessarily true. Science and religion then constitute an unbridgeable dichotomy because religions include beliefs about the proper ends and thus the worth of human life in general or as such, and contingent facts never imply anything about the good in human life. Any such supposed implication commits what has come to be called the naturalistic fallacy. Given solely contingent conditions of existence, then, no assertion about worth or the good to be realized can be validated without positing a prior such assertion in need of validation. Hence, all such assertions are dogmatic, immune to critical or rational assessment.

That all meaningful statements about the world are logically contingent is, I am persuaded, essential to secularism in all of its expressions and widely affirmed in contemporary western thought. Nonetheless, some secularists—for instance, Kant and some Kantians—hold that moral as well as scientific assertions are objects of rational assessment. On this basis, moreover, Kant himself advanced a solely practical interpretation of religion that purports to be independent of any statement about conditions of existence. If all such conditions are contingent, however, I doubt that any supposedly rational account of morality can succeed. As far as I can see, all moral theories at least implicitly affirm, even if some explicitly deny doing so, an end or state or affairs to be maximized or pursued, so that purposes in their entirety ought to be directed to it. Hence, given the secularistic premise about existence, evaluation cannot escape the need always to posit a prior evaluation assertion.

On that analysis, secularism reduces practical reason to instrumental thought in service to ends nonrationally chosen. One thinker has called this the modern “complementarity system of value-free rationality and pre-rational value decisions” (Apel 1979, 38). Facts can be public, and values are inherently private, and religion includes entirely general statements about what is entirely private. David Hume and Max Weber then command the field. Still, I will not defend this reading of secularism—and, instead, will assume it and note the following: that the world is exhausted by the kind of facts science seeks to discover cannot itself be one of those facts. That all conditions of existence are contingent cannot itself be a contingent condition of existence; it can only be a necessary condition of all things, such that assertion of it cannot be denied without self-contradiction.

Even then, one might endorse this necessity by insisting that “nothing exists,” meaning the complete absence of everything, is itself logically possible, whereby the presence of anything at all is indeed necessarily contingent. But that insistence is especially difficult to defend, and I hold that “nothing exists” or “there might have been sheer nothing” is itself logically impossible or nonsensical—because it cannot be distinguished from a putative statement (for instance, a self-contradictory statement) that says nothing at all. Again, I will not pursue this argument, but if the conclusion is correct, “something exists” is a logically necessary statement, and reasoning about the world includes the metaphysical project. Here, metaphysics is critical reflection that seeks to clarify the necessary conditions of existence, that is, to explicate the implications of “something exists.” A true metaphysics explicates ultimate reality, the ultimate nature of things—and provides the terms in which the relation between science and religion may be reconceived.

Given necessary conditions of existence, all human life includes an experience of them; what is necessarily present is always present in human experience, characterizing the past we inherit, the present, and the future about which we decide. We may, then, define religion in terms of the abiding human relation to ultimate reality. That relation defines the ultimate worth of human life because, summarily stated, decision with understanding necessarily compares its alternatives for purpose *with respect to choosing*, thereby evaluating them, and the fallacy of so comparing them in terms of some logically contingent understanding of existence is no longer in force. In other words,

metaphysical conditions define or include a good given in the ultimate nature of things and whose realization human decisions are bound to maximize.

On my accounting, religions are not themselves metaphysical proposals. To the contrary, a religion is a cultural formation of concepts and symbols, including symbolic practices, in which some belief about human life in relation to ultimate reality is so represented explicitly that adherents of the religion may, by focusing on it, cultivate expression of that belief in all of their activity. The function of religion, we can say, is to mediate an existential understanding of ourselves in relation to the entirety of which we are parts. But if not themselves metaphysical proposals, religions *imply* a set of metaphysical claims, precisely because the understanding a religion seeks to mediate concerns one's relation to ultimate reality. In that way, each religion attempts to make explicit what is always present in the experience of all humans.

For this reason, religions are not “matters of faith” if that term means a belief immune to rational validation or invalidation. Each religion may indeed be called a faith because its function is to cultivate an existential understanding of our ultimate worth. But every religious representation can be critically assessed by formulating its metaphysical and moral implications and asking whether they accord with the inescapable human relation to ultimate reality. Critical thought of this kind, Iris Murdoch once wrote, is “determined to *argue* for something it already *knows*” (Murdoch 1993, 435). Religious convictions can themselves be rationally validated and invalidated because they seek to make explicit something in human experience implied by every human belief and activity—and from religion so understood, an alternative view of its relation to science follows.

Metaphysical conditions not only make possible the ultimate worth of human life but also constitute the abiding aspect of the world empirical science investigates. Such conditions are common to subjects who decide, on the one hand, and to the objects of science, on the other. Moreover, science is an activity of subjects and, like all of our activities, is something we decide to pursue because we affirm it as worthy. Accordingly, science is properly ordered by the truth about our ultimate worth each religion seeks explicitly to represent. This in no way denies that many facts—indeed, all facts about the world except those at the very highest or necessary level of abstraction—are contingent, and therefore the

scientific method, proper to critical reasoning about some contingent facts, is autonomous within the realm to which it applies. Nor does this account in any way imply that science should be controlled by any specific practical purpose or particular religious community or tradition. The point is simply this: our true relation to ultimate reality, whose critical explication includes a true metaphysics, is the reason for the scientific enterprise, thereby setting the proper terms for defining the scientific method and for conceiving the relation of religion and science.

The dichotomy described in the previous question presupposes a set of epistemological claims that have political implications, in terms of enabling some and disabling other possibilities for thinking, acting and judging the social order in which we live and the historical becoming through which it has been constituted. For example, the presumed epistemic superiority of the language of modern sciences over the language of mythological or religious discourses as grids for making the world and the human condition intelligible is an integral part of how the political history of the encounters between modern western nation-states and their colonized “others” is narrated. Or, to offer another example, this alleged epistemic superiority easily leads to a secularistic conception of political agency as a history-constituting and history-transforming power, widely dominant in the context of modern societies. This conception does not allow us to understand and think through the ways in which religious discourses and practices have been decisive in forming significant practices of political resistance like the civil rights movement in the United States. A set of epistemological claims can profoundly condition the ontology of the social world of which we consider ourselves to be a part, silencing other ways of understanding history and the type of agency that can configure it, or transform it. In the trajectory of your work, how do you understand the relation between epistemology and politics (or between epistemological and political problems), in connection to the science-religion dyad of which we have been speaking? Or to put it somewhat differently, what are the implications in our understanding of the political that derive from the way we assume a set of epistemological claims to draw the distinction between science and religion in a certain way?

MN: Nothing is more powerful than Truth and that is a common element in both science and religion. Authority, order and dominion have to do with the

existence of subjects with the authority to speak for others. The very idea of Truth eliminates any possibility of debate or of public participation; it is contrary to opinion or diversity. Once Truth and its spokesmen arrive, the public arena is left vacant; it is, so to speak, the end of politics.

We could argue that the main concern of current social studies of science (among historians, philosophers, and sociologists of knowledge) is the problem of power, of how the relations between knowledge and politics are formed. Thus, the relation between epistemology and politics is total. The great problem of power, from the viewpoint of a historian of science, has to do with understanding how the spokesmen of Truth are constituted, that is to say individuals, or better yet, social groups, that have the authority to speak for everyone else. The birth of modern science and the European Enlightenment are fundamentally changes in political history; it is, once again, the battle for Truth. Who has the truth about nature, about the human body, about society, about economics and, of course, about eternity... it is a powerful agent in the constitution of order, both social and natural. It is in this sense that we cannot understand politics outside of the religious or scientific spheres.

Let's think about the great historical processes of, for example, the empires of Christian Europe and their conquest of much of the planet, which has been justified precisely by the idea of Christian Europe as the bearer of religious and scientific truths. The discovery and conquest of America were motivated and justified by the propagation of Christian dogma; the domination as well as the extermination of other cultures were carried out in the name of God, of a truth that had to be spread or imposed for the good of humankind. The manifestation of cultural or scientific superiority that imposed western European ways of understanding, ordering and operating on nature and society was not very different.

It might be worthwhile clarifying here that the relations between science and politics should not be understood as the interaction between distinct spheres or as instrumental relations in which science is influenced by or operates in the name of politics; it is more a question of understanding science as politics. It is not a matter, for example, of explaining science within the context of imperial history, but rather as imperial history. In fact, it is practices such as geography, natural history, medicine, economics,

forms of power in action, practices that shape new natural and social orders and simultaneously shape practices that constitute the subjects that define said orders. A similar reflection should be made regarding religion and politics, thinking not so much of religion at the service of politics, as an instrument of power, but rather of religion as politics and as power.

FG: On my accounting, the supposed dichotomy between science and religion follows from the secularistic assumption that all conditions of existence are contingent. On the correlative account of epistemology, both morality and religion involve nonrational beliefs, and practical reason is reduced to its instrumental service toward ends humans are left merely to decide or posit. This reading takes issue with those for whom a secularistic morality can be rational, but I also expressed doubt that any such proposal can succeed. To the best of my reasoning, human decision as such chooses among alternatives for purpose, and every moral theory at least implies an understanding of worth or the good that properly directs purposes in their entirety—and no such understanding can be validated if all conditions of existence are contingent.

Given the reductive account of practical reason, the consequences for political life are considerable. If human ends are nonrational, human association is properly seen as the interaction of strategically concerned individuals or groups, each relating to the others in terms of its own private purposes. Political life is reduced to the accidental conflict and concord of private interests and thus, unless violence or war results, to bargaining negotiations. The model for such interaction is the concept of economic exchange, where each party calculates benefits in terms of its preferences in order to reach an agreement. In sum, the rationalization of society is rightly captured in Weber's description of modernity, and something similar characterizes the interaction among nations.

To be sure, modern western political theories have often purported to be democratic. Procedures of fair interaction, sometimes including principles for a distribution of resources in accord with some account of equal opportunity, are said to provide the context within which nonrational interests or purposes are acceptable—and norms for international relations are sometimes derived from these democratic proposals. Liberalism in political thought is often said to be the consequence, and many theories of this kind imply dominance within the social order of economic

institutions and goals —precisely because they are thought to provide all-purpose means to diverse private ends. But secularism as described above prevents, I believe, any democratic principles of justice all citizens have reason to consider prescriptive. What counts for individuals and groups as good relations to other people will depend on what is affirmed as the inclusive good that action should pursue —and if, in each case, the latter is nonrational, rational norms for politics cannot be derived.

This reading of secularistic democratic theories is confirmed by their attempts to interpret the constitutional principle of religious freedom. Given constitutional legitimization of, and thus governmental neutrality toward, diverse religious convictions (or, more extensively, what John Rawls calls comprehensive doctrines), how is principled common action and thus political community possible? The pluralism in question, virtually all agree, involves convictions about the overall or inclusive orientation of human life, and secularistic theories of religious freedom typically propose to separate public reason or democratic principles from any one of these orientations. Such independence is thought to be required because the convictions legitimized at least include religious beliefs, and they are assumed to be nonrational “matters of faith.” Hence, principled neutrality toward the entire class entails separation from any member thereof.

As far as I can see, however, this solution is untenable. Each conviction about the inclusive orientation of human life implies that all principles of justice depend on it, and relevant disagreement among religions or comprehensive doctrines is a conflict at the most fundamental level of political evaluation. A proposal in which justice is separated from any one is, then, a denial of all of them —or, what comes to the same thing, a competitive assertion about the most fundamental character of justice. Because the beliefs religious freedom legitimizes are said to be nonrational, the principled separation that governmental neutrality is said to require must be constitutionally stipulated —and thereby the constitution contradicts itself, explicitly denying the convictions it also protects. In truth, a legitimized plurality of nonrational convictions about justice as such cannot be civilized; the only alternatives are a *modus vivendi* or a fight.

If secularistic epistemology makes religious freedom incoherent, the alternative opened by the metaphysical project entails an alternative account of democracy.

Differing religions are now understood as differing attempts to explicate our common human experience of ultimate reality and our ultimate worth. Thereby, all convictions about the inclusive orientation of our activities can be critically assessed as valid or invalid —and the principle of religious freedom is no longer inconsistent with political community: a legitimate diversity of beliefs about the fundamental terms of political evaluation can be civilized through a full and free political discourse. To be sure, activities of the state informed by this discourse cannot be independent of all such beliefs but, rather, will *imply* some or other fundamental terms of justice —namely, those the discourse of the relevant majority of democratic citizens, at least at a given time, finds convincing. But those activities may still be *explicitly* neutral to the diversity if the government is always prohibited from teaching anything about the religion or comprehensive doctrine any activity of the state does or does not imply.

Focus on the coherence of religious freedom is a window on the political consequences of an adequate metaphysics. Given that convictions about worth in human life as such are properly objects of rational assessment, political life is not interaction among and for the sake of private interests or ends but, rather, is properly directed by a common human vocation we all find in our experience. Democracy constitutes a full and free discussion and debate seeking to clarify that vocation and apply it to activities of the state. A secularistic account of liberal politics then becomes one more proposal about our relation to ultimate reality —and is, moreover, pragmatically self-refuting because it asserts the nonrational character of such proposals.

I will, then, simply assert my own neoclassical convictions about the necessary conditions of existence: the metaphysically fundamental things are social in character. Each is a present event defined by its internal relations to events of the past and its decision how to condition the future, and worth or the good is defined by the creativity made possible by those relations and achieved by unifying them for the sake of subsequent events. The implication for morality, I will also simply assert, is a comprehensive purpose prescribing, with due attention to value in the nonhuman world, unification or activity in pursuit of maximal human sociality, a common world of human achievements I will call our maximal common humanity —so that all humans flourish because each is empowered insofar as possible by relations to all of the others. Political purpose, then, properly seeks to

provide or promote the general conditions required to maximize this common humanity—even if that principle of public purpose should only be implied by activities of the state and is properly explicit only in the political discourse. I recognize the terse and, perhaps, cryptic nature of this formulation. But its intent is simply to underscore by illustration how the rational character of religious convictions and their metaphysical implications entails a conception of politics as itself properly directed by an ideal—which is, given neoclassical metaphysics, humanitarian—ever-present in the experience of us all.

From the perspective of your field of academic research (as a historian of science / as a theologian), is it possible, and if so how, to reflect upon a divine agency in the eventfulness of historical and social realities or processes (for instance, in the way it is performed by political actors directly implied in these processes)? And why would it be important, if it is, from the perspective of your academic work, to resist the stigma of “irrationality” that constantly threatens to invalidate or silence a reflection of this type?

MN: In his book *The Personal God*, Ulrich Beck says with good reason: “We carry the language of secularism in our blood,” and presents us with the enormous difficulty that sociology encounters in dealing with the subject of religious experiences. We could say that true heresy for the world of modern science is the incorporation of agency or divine forces into history; that is to say, we can see an evident failure of the social sciences in their explanation of the spiritual. The religious sphere presents a challenge, a notable difficulty for the social sciences, which are essentially secular. Are there any alternatives for understanding the spiritual with respect to secularization? Let us start by recalling that it has not always been this way. In the writings and historical explanations of 16th century Christian chroniclers, we find that God, the saints, the Virgin Mary, and demons all played definitive roles in history. Their version of history is explicitly providential, and the cause of what happens in history is the will of God. Nonetheless, a long and dominant historiographical tradition has reduced the religious to the level of irrational beliefs. This reduction of the religious to false beliefs eventually reduces the religious to the realm of rhetoric or representation. Thus, in its relation to great historical processes such as the conquest of America, the religious or the spiritual appears in modern historiography as merely accessory factors, subordinated to “more real” factors such as economics, trade, or politics, which are considered the true agents

of history. However, I do not believe it is possible to understand the history of the expansion of Christianity in the 16th century, for example, if we leave aside religious experience, or even the power of God. The sources to which we have access in our efforts to understand the 16th century make it evident that human actions and historic events were carried out in the name of God.

I believe that there are different options to explore with respect to this problem. Within the framework of Social Studies of Science, a certain theoretical proposal has gained importance which I believe could offer interesting alternatives. Bruno Latour, John Law, Michael Callon, among others, most likely tired of the very generalized social explanation of scientific knowledge, wanted to incorporate the agency of non-human actors into their historical explanations. In the final decades of the 20th century, the expression “social construction” of this and that was used very frequently, and reality itself was presented as a social construct, thus giving the impression that sociology could explain everything. This position is based on a major and problematic assumption, which is that society is less complex than the natural world, and given this difficulty, the interesting proposal of incorporating non-human agents into historical explanations has appeared in sociology, which has been denominated the Actor Network Theory (ANT). This is not the time to go into detail about the work of this school of sociologists; the point is not only to consider their call to incorporate the agency of artifacts or natural entities in the conformation of networks that will make it possible to understand the history of scientific theories and technological practices, but to extend this notion of agency of the non-human to divine “actors” as well. I do not know of any proposals from this perspective to refer to “divine agents,” but neither do I see any reason to exclude them. Finally, we must remember that the role of actors in terms of networks is explained as a result of the interaction among heterogeneous agents. The actors do not operate, which means they do not exist outside of these interactions; they do not precede the networks, but are instead a product of them. In this order of ideas, both a saint and a demon possess “agency” to the extent that they interact with humans and with nature, and I see no reason not to recognize their power. This historic recognition of divine power assumes neither that we will become mystic sociologists nor believers in religious doctrines. It is rather a matter of a secular sociology capable of incorporating the agency of the non-human. It is possible that not too many concessions will be required of contemporary social sciences to recognize the agency of artifacts, of the printing press on modern culture, of the ships and navigation instruments used

in Europe's conquest of the seas; it is equally plausible to invoke geographical, biological or physical aspects in history. It is widely accepted today that the European conquest of America would be difficult to explain without considering biological factors such as the role of European diseases and the effects they had on the vulnerable immune systems of the native population. What would have become of Columbus' adventure or enterprise without the winds and ocean currents of the Atlantic?

However, the inclusion of saints, demons or gods in modern history is much more difficult to accept. The tone of the Christian chroniclers sounds both strange and inadequate to us, as does the reason they give for the historic events of the 16th century. Is this an absurd way of explaining the Christian history of the 16th century? Is it not evident that human actions had and in many cases still continue to have spiritual motivations? Is God not the most powerful of all actors in the history of the expansion of Christianity, a God in whose name monarchs, soldiers, priests, captains and sailors all acted?

FG: If ultimate reality is present to us all, and neoclassical metaphysics rightly defines the good, a divine individual is, I believe, implied. Here, God is conceived as that-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought. Given a social purpose in the ultimate nature of things, the greatest possible individual must be the eminently temporal whole of reality, whose sociality presently unifies in all of its detail all that has ever occurred and whose future moments will always add in all of their detail new occurrences as they become present. One way to explicate the implication of deity is the following: worldly decision for maximal good inescapably seeks its realization in a future multiplicity of events, for instance, in the creative achievements of human persons; but this maximizing makes no sense unless the many realizations pursued are somehow summated or unified. Moreover, the unification must be concrete because the realizations pursued—for instance, the human achievements—will be concrete. A temporal individual each of whose presents is the concrete whole of strictly all reality is required.

On this account, the ultimate worth of our lives is nothing other than the difference they make to God, whose sociality is itself maximized when we seek the greatest good for the worldly future. Further, the worth is ultimate because inclusion of our deeds and their worldly effects within the divine is everlasting, whereby they “make a difference which no turn of events in the future has the power to annul” (Ogden 1996, 36). As far as I can see, we

all affirm this permanent worth whenever we decide with understanding. The supposed thought that what we do will eventually be worthless, canceled by the sands of time, is something no human can really believe. Evaluation of our alternatives is, in truth, all things considered—and eventual nullity is a meaningless consideration for practical reason. If nothing ultimate is at stake in what we do, then ultimately nothing is at stake.

Given that reason commends fundamental terms of political evaluation dependent on metaphysical theism, common human experience includes an experience of God. But this in no way implies what has often been asserted as “a divine agency in the eventfulness of historical and social realities.” At least on many formulations, God is a completely eternal absolute that chose to create a completely contingent world and has the power to intervene by choice in worldly affairs. In our social and political life, then, special events may interrupt the course of human or natural causality because eternity for its own purposes then and there breaks into worldly history—and, correspondingly, we may petition for such special activity.

That conception bears the “stigma of irrationality” because the character of this eternity cannot be present in common human experience and thus cannot be established by critical reasoning. As is often acknowledged by advocates of this idea, it defines God literally by complete negation of all worldly characteristics (for instance, temporality, contingency, or dependence), and all positive characterization of God must be mythical or symbolic. Accordingly, the divine character must be suprarational and thus known only through its special disclosure or revelation. This all too pervasive notion of the transcendent reality has played its part in confirming the secularistic view of science and religion—that is, a world in all respects contingent, such that critical inquiry about it is exhausted by science, and religious belief is immune to reasoned assessment.

Against that notion, the affirmation of metaphysical sociality implies the necessity of some or other world as well as the necessity of God. An eminently social whole of reality depends on nondivine realities; a worldly class with some or other members must also exist, even while each one exists contingently because it relates to others fragmentarily. Among individuals, the divine alone exists necessarily, always unifying the whole completely. Only as this all-inclusive reality, if I see the matter rightly, can God's character be ever-present in

the entire world —so that science is properly ordered and politics properly directed by the abiding relation to ultimate reality religions seek explicitly to represent.

It remains that God's agency is essential to our life together —not through special divine interventions within history but, rather, through the divine purpose present in common human experience. Because the future of human affairs and, indeed, of the whole world is also the future of the deity who alone gives ultimate worth to human life, we have a common affection for the humanitarian ideal, and divine agency is essential to the presence of this telos in every person and in our common life, giving point to politics itself. The truth about our lives attaches us, we may say, to the beloved community because we are attached to its God. ♦

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